DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 564 CS 205 187

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TITLE The Paradoxes of Freedom: A Thematic Approach to Teaching a Compulsory Composition Course to a Multi-Ethnic Student Population.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Savannah, Georgia, March 22-24, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Community Colleges; *Composition (Literary); English Instruction; *Expository Writing; Higher Education; *Individual Power; Personal Growth; Philosophy; *Teaching Techniques; *Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

A composition teacher at a New York City community college where cooperative education is stressed found that focusing the writing of his multiethnic students on the theme of freedom helped them look at their lives differently, revealing the contradictions involved in their beliefs, ideals, and prejudices. The course began with a discussion of freedom in classroom situations, noting the restrictions that the students readily accepted in exchange for education. This discussion led to an argument essay on the compatibility of freedom and disciplined studies. The next essay was on cause and effect, following a reading of B.F. Skinner's "Walden Two" and class discussion of the events that led to the students enrolling in college. After reading W.E.B. DeBois' comments on work as satisfaction, the students wrote essays in which they defined a job they considered desirable and explained why they would find it satisfying. Then the teacher assigned readings from "The Essentials of Zen Buddhism" by D.T. Suzuki, leading to a comparison essay in which the students contrasted their visions of the future with Buddhist views. The end results were students responding to new concepts and perspectives with written works that had substance, immediacy, and vigor. (RL)

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The Paradoxes of Freedom: A Thematic Approach to Teaching a Compulsory Composition Course to a Multi-Ethnic Student Population

by Daniel J. Lynch
La Guardia Community College

In an overheated, windowless classroom in the basement of a remodeled factory sit twenty-five students--young men and women, Black and Hispanic, White and Chinese--staring intently at a besuited instructor behind a desk. After days of standing on long registration lines, of taking batteries of placement tests, of threading their way through the thickets of the institution's admissions process, they have found themselves here with me. And what do I do? Like the rest of you, I write my name on the board, the section number, the name of the course, and then I call the roll from the computer printout furnished by the registrar. I distribute departmental descriptions of the course which will explain they are here to become better essay writers. Many of them won't believe it, though. I'm sure they won't. They are here to get a three-piece suit.

La Guardia Community College is a two-year branch of the City University of New York, and it is committed to cooperative education. This means that the students attend classes for three quarters and go out on jobs related to their majors in the fourth. This "internship" offers them the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in their fields, whether it be Data Processing, Accounting, Human Services or even the Liberal Arts. The system works. Indeed some of our graduates start making larger salaries

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than their instructors.

The new students back in that basement know this, and they also know that, if they don't pass our compulsory Basic Composition course, they don't graduate, and plunk!, there go their upwardly mobile aspirations. Since they see La Guardia as an appropriate vehicle, perhaps the only one, by which to realize their ambitions--middle-class jobs and the prestige and income associated with them--they must stay and see the course through. They are anxious to do so for several reasons.

Writing effectively, my students have told me, is a desirable skill, like reading and computation, necessary for success in the business world. If writing, as a skill, can help them get ahead, then they are all for it.

Secondly, if a teacher stands before them and tells them writing is important, the institution, which they believe is offering them a better chance in life, invests the instructor with enormous authority. The students wish to embrace the concepts that are being advanced in their courses because that act is part of a pattern of acceptance of middle-class goals that has brought them to the college. They tend to adopt an unquestioning attitude toward the instructor because, I suspect, he or she is perceived as exercising a kind of gatekeeper function for them in their journey into middle-class life.

I have taught such classes many times, and I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the underlying passivity that

characterizes the attitudes of many of our students toward learning. Writing effectively, I believe, is not a skill like computation which exists in some way independent of the person's nature. The complex process of writing reveals, explains, defines and changes the person. It is this concept of the totality of the writing experience that I wished my students to explore, yet I needed a structure with which to achieve my objective.

In a cafeteria conversation one day in 1977, a colleague who teaches Philosophy at La Guardia, Dr. Neil Rossman, told me about his use in an introductory course of the theme of freedom. In his classes, freedom is not defined in a limiting, Aristotelian manner, but rather explored and analyzed experientially, focusing on the student's life experience. To Dr. Rossman, my students and I owe much, for I saw how his idea could be adapted to the teaching of Composition. By bringing our students to the point where they would look at their lives and see the contradictions involved in their beliefs, ideals and prejudices, we hoped that out of this alchemist's brew of perplexity and confusion, questions and tentative answers, would come . . . thought, and essays which reflected that thought.

As the course started, with the instructor groping along with the rest, I suggested, in order to make the discussion of freedom as immediate as possible, that we look at their position in life at that very moment, namely in the room with me. In doing so, we became aware of a paradox: the students began to realize that we were analyzing the concept of freedom in an environment

and context--the classroom and the course--where they were demonstrably not "free," but were rather under considerable constraint. Here are some of the observations that emerged from student discussion:

--the student's role is defined by the situation, not by him- or herself. (The mere use of the words "instructor" and "student" carried role defining connotations.) Twelve years of prior schooling have conditioned the student to speak only after he or she has raised his or her hand and been recognized, yet, the instructor, sitting authoritatively behind a large desk, or strolling diffidently across the front of the room, speaks at will.

--the physical setting is determined by others, principally the college's architects, whose love of blank, white walls forces the students' eyes instructorwards.

--the students must express their ideas in Standard American Written English, a dialect with which they may be uncomfortable, but which the instructor speaks fluently.

--essay topics are either determined or approved by the instructor.

--manuscript format is rigid.

--the rhetorical strategy used in an essay is chosen by the instructor.

--that hallowed expression of character, the student's own writing style, is formed to a considerable extent by the instructor with his or her emphasis on clear thesis sentences,

complex sentence structure, appropriate diction, understandable transitions and so forth.

--attendance is compulsory.

--oral classroom discussion, where one might hope to find a "free" exchange of ideas is, in fact, quite onesided. I doubt if any student has ever said, "Yes, Professor, I see what you're getting at, and there's a germ of truth in it. Now, let's see if we can carry it one step further . . . ."

The students grow quite involved in hunting out the smallest of classroom limitations. Once the list has been compiled, I raise the question, "To what extent are freedom and disciplined studies compatible?" This serves as the topic of an Argument essay. In their papers, the students tend to say that although they now see there are obvious limitations on them in the course, they are restrictions freely entered into in order to achieve worthwhile goals, among them graduating from La Guardia.

This takes the analysis of freedom to a different level. Our students are poor. Demographically they are 40% Black, 25% White, 35% Hispanic and Other. Fifty different languages have been spoken in our Writing Center. Many are immigrants or the children of immigrants. I ask them to read a chapter from B.F. Skinner's Walden Two (New York: Macmillan, 1948,) in which Skinner attempts to demonstrate the ubiquity of conditioning in our lives. In that context we discuss the events that led up to their coming to La Guardia. Certainly they aspire, but are they living out their parents' dreams? To what extent has

their prior experience in schools or in the business world conditioned them to look upon La Guardia as a suitable means of realizing their ambitions. In an essay whose theme is Cause and Effect, I ask them to examine the factors, familial, economic, and cultural, which brought them to La Guardia, and to discuss the "freedom" of their decision. This, as I think you would readily admit, is a difficult task. For example, if a student recognizes he or she has come to La Guardia largely because of pressure to do so from someone close, a parent or lover, the student has to examine the notion of freedom in the light of this emotional relationship, a tie that implies obligations and control at many levels.

Others approach the topic differently, but the issues are no less complex. Some Black and Hispanic students write of a pattern of discrimination at work in their pasts. They are sensitive to issues of historical prejudice which has made their climb into affluence toilsome. By taking advantage of what the college offers, even if their other options were severely limited, they can free themselves from the restrictions of low paying, deadend jobs.

At this point in the course, I urge them to look more closely at this widespread vocational concept of education by reading and reflecting on W. E. B. Du Bois' comments on work, found in his Address on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday. He says in part that, "Income is not greenbacks, it is satisfaction; it is creation; it is beauty (The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois, New York: International, 1968.)" If the purpose

of their stay is to gain the skills which would enable them to get a better job, I assign them an essay in which they are to define a job they would consider desirable and to explain through the use of example why they would honestly find satisfaction in that position. (As part of our discussion before the students write the paper, I present them with another quotation from Du B ois: "The purpose of education is to become leaders." Then I ask them to pretend for a few moments that they are in charge of the education of a future leader and to draw up a course of studies for him or her. I urge you all to try this in your courses for the results are most revealing. On every single occasion, my students describe a well rounded Liberal Arts curriculum--History, Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology, Math, the sciences. Many students quickly draw the inference that a strictly vocationally oriented education does not train <u>them</u> to lead, and some I have heard have widened their course selection as a result of this exercise.)

Now that my students and I have gone through the process of examining the concept of freedom in the student's own life, in the classroom and in the course, in regard to factors which have determined their coming to this college, in respect to their choices of career goals and their selection of courses and majors to achieve those goals, I attempt to show them a radically different view of freedom--that of the Zen monk. We read and discuss an article on Zen by D.T. Suzuki (<u>The Essentials of Zen Buddhism</u>, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1962.)

In Buddhism, on achieves a kind of freedom by extinguishing desire. Our discussions on this are quite interesting because up to this point the students have been speaking and writing of themselves in terms of personal and career goals, that is, their desires. When they learn that others do not do so, this inclines them to re-evaluate their understanding of personality. To encourage them to reflect thoughtfully on the disparity between the two views, they write a Comparison essay in which they are to contrast their vision of the future with that of the Buddhist.

By the end of the course, the students have become actively involved in writing about their thought on a significant and difficult issue, freedom, which we have explored, not abstractly, but in terms of the students' lives. The process had begun by confronting one paradox--the course itself is clearly not free from limitation and psychological restraints--and has continued while another paradox emerged--the students often start with a manifest desire to accept some sort of preconceived standard set of values which they associate with the college and middle-class institutions in general, yet that conforming impulse is dialectically opposed to the instructor's intention of urging them to question values and ideas.

The end result is a student who has written essays which are the product of a struggle with new concepts and perspectives. The thinking involved in answering the questions posed by the course gives their work substance, immediacy and vigor.